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The Media Elite: White, Male, Secular and Liberal

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NEWSMEN HAVE LONG cherished the vantage point of the outsiders who keep the insiders straight. But now leading journalists are courted by politicians, studied by scholars and known to millions through their bylines and televised images. In short, the needs of a society increasingly hungry for information have contributed to the rise of a national news network — the new media elite.

As part of a larger study on elites, we surveyed members of the national media elite during 1979 and 1980. The findings, it should be understood, tell us only about the backgrounds and attitudes of journalists as individuals. They do not tell us about the content of the news they present nor, indeed, whether the content is affected by their personal views at all. Nonetheless, they do provide more detail than previously available about who makes up the media elite.

In some respects, the journalists we interviewed appear typical of leadership groups throughout society. The media elite is composed mainly of white males in their thirties and forties. Only one in 20 is nonwhite; one in five is female. Ninety-three percent have college degrees, and a majority (55 percent) attended graduate school as well.

These figures reveal them as one of the best educated groups in America. They are also one of the better paid groups, despite journalism's reputation as a low-paying profession. In 1978, 78 percent earned at least $30,000, and one in three had salaries that exceeded $50,000. Moreover, nearly half (46 percent) reported family incomes above $50,000.

Geographically, they are drawn primarily from Northern industrial states, especially from the Northeast corridor. Two-fifths come from three states: New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Another 10 percent hail from New England, and almost one in five was raised in the big industrial states just to the west — Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. Thus, over two-thirds of the media elite come from these three clusters of states. By contrast, only 3 percent are drawn from the entire Pacific Coast, including California, the nation's most populous state.

Journalism is a profession associated with rapid upward mobility, yet we found few Horatio Alger stories in the newsroom. On the contrary, many among the media elite enjoyed socially privileged upbringings. Most were raised in upper-middle-class homes. Almost half their fathers were college graduates, and one in four held a graduate degree. Two in five are the children of professionals — doctors, lawyers, teachers and so on. In fact, one in 12 is following in his father's footsteps as a second-generation journalist. Another 40 percent describe their fathers as businessmen.

That leaves only one in five whose father was employed in a low-status blue- or white-collar job. Given these upper-status positions, it is not surprising that their families were relatively well off. Forty-five percent rate their family's income while they were growing up as above average, compared to 26 percent who view their early economic status as below average.

All these characteristics might be expected to predispose people toward the social liberalism of the cosmopolitan outsider. And indeed, much of the media elite upholds the cosmopolitan or anti-bourgeois social perspective.

A predominant characteristic of the media elite is its secular outlook. Exactly 50 percent eschew any religious affiliation. Another 14 percent are Jewish, and almost one in four (23 percent) was raised in a Jewish household. Only one in five identifies himself as Protestant, and one in eight as Catholic. Very few are regular churchgoers. Only 8 percent go to church or synagogue weekly, and 86 percent seldom or never attend religious services.

Ideologically, a majority of leading journalists describe themselves as liberals. Fifty-four percent place themselves to the left of center, compared to only 19 percent who choose the right side of the spectrum.

These subjective ratings are borne out by their voting records in presidential elections since 1964. In 1972, when 62 percent of the electorate chose Nixon, 81 percent of the media elite voted for McGovern. This does not appear to reflect any particular personal aversion to Nixon, despite the well-publicized tensions between the press and his administration. Four years later, leading journalists preferred Carter over Ford by exactly the same margin. In fact, in the Democratic landside of 1964, media leaders picked Johnson over Goldwater by the staggering margin of 16-to-1, or 94 to 6 percent.

These presidential choices are consistent with the media elite's liberal views on a wide range of social and political issues. They show a strong preference for welfare capitalism, pressing for assistance to the poor in the form of income redistribution and guaranteed employment. Few are outright socialists. For example, they overwhelmingly reject the proposition that major corporations should be state owned. Only one in eight would agree to state ownership of corporations, and two-thirds declare themselves strongly opposed.

Most also believe that free enterprise gives workers a fair shake, and that deregulation of business would be good for the country. Seventy percent agree that private enterprise is fair to working people, and almost as many, 63 percent, say that less regulation of business would serve the national interest.

But they are equally committed to the welfare state. Sixty-eight percent, about the same proportion that praise the fairness of private enterprise, also agree that the government should substantially reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor. They are almost evenly divided over the issue of guaranteed employment. Forty-eight percent believe the government should guarantee a job to anyone who wants one, while a slight majority of 52 percent oppose this principle of entitlement.

It is today's divisive "social iss[illegible] that bring their liberalism to the fore. Leading journalists emerge from our survey as strong supporters of environmental protection, affirmative action, women's rights, homosexual rights and sexual freedom in general.

Fewer than one in five assents to the statement, "our environmental problems are not as serious as people have been led to believe." Only 1 percent strongly agree that environmental problems are overrated, while a majority of 54 percent strongly disagree. They are nearly as vehement in their support for affirmative action. Despite both the heated controversy over this issue and their own predominantly white racial composition, four out of five media leaders endorse the use of